

# Blackbird-Millington Corridor Conservation Area Plan

## Strategic Actions for Communication and Education

As previously discussed, strategic actions are the on-the-ground programs and activities developed (via workshops, focus groups, and individual meetings) to achieve the conservation objectives for the Corridor. Many of the agencies and organizations in leading and supporting these strategies were identified, and most played a role in the development of those strategies. However, there are instances where leads were identified by others and the ability or commitment of the lead for carrying out the strategy is uncertain. Building any capacity or resources needed to carry out strategies is assumed to be the responsibility of the lead and supporting entities, with the recognition that there are no guarantees when resources are inadequate. Figure 32 is a table identifying all of the strategies (including those described below) and the primary attributes or threats that each was designed to address.

The success of conservation efforts in the Corridor depend on many different organizations, agencies, and individuals, including residents and landowners. To be successful, a consistent and reliable mechanism for communication and coordination between the various organizations and agencies is needed. For landowners and residents to fulfill their roles in preservation, educational programs and ongoing public outreach and communication will be needed. Following (and summarized in Figure 36) are the Education and Communication strategies identified for the Corridor.<sup>1</sup>

**1. To achieve better public support and participation in Corridor preservation efforts, direct, coordinate, and connect environmental education opportunities utilizing the established centers at the Blackbird State Forest and Delaware National Estuarine Research Reserve, and incorporating the Millington Wildlife Management Area to provide opportunities, information and programs to local residents, decision-makers and children.**

The support of the local community and taxpayers who finance public conservation efforts is crucial to preservation success in the Corridor. Developing and delivering programs for children and adult decision-makers will build awareness of the wildlife habitat provided by the Corridor today and the importance of its preservation into the future, and give residents the tools they need to play a productive role in conservation efforts. Engaging local schools, scouts, 4H, and other youth groups to include Corridor habitat conservation in their educational curriculum will make the most of education resources and programs.

The Delaware National Estuarine Research Reserve has a great deal of experience in providing educational environmental programs -- with an expanded site in the Corridor (with public facilities planned), DNERR is well-suited to creating and delivering a Corridor educational program, especially as it pertains to the Corridor's watershed, rivers, streams, and wetlands. Corridor habitats and issues should be taken into consideration in the design of future programs and facilities at DNERR.

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<sup>1</sup> There may be minor differences in the wording of strategies presented in Figure 36 from those presented here, and in the Executive Report. Strategic Action titles/statements were simplified for brevity in the Executive Report, but numbering is consistent.

The Blackbird State Forest also has invested in education, with the creation of a new education center on the Meadows Tract in 2004, where school children are a primary focus. The center should incorporate Corridor habitats and issues in its children's programs and also explore ways to service adults -- both local residents and decision-makers. The Blackbird State Forest education center and staff would be particularly adept at developing and delivering programs that focuses on the Corridor's forests.

The Millington Wildlife Management Area (MWMA) currently has little capacity for providing formal education -- with only a rough service building on the site. However, it is open to the public, has trails, and is especially well-utilized by the hunting community. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MDDNR) could better utilize MWMA to educate people on Corridor habitat and priorities by providing educational signage at the entrance and along trails, and even by offering outdoor programs. MWMA has some excellent woodland, stream and coastal plain pond habits (as does Blackbird State Forest.)

Each of the above facilities can include education about Corridor habitat in their materials and efforts and share educational materials/programs with each other to create an exciting Corridor-wide network of educational opportunities for adults and children. They can also work together to develop a joint program, such as a self-guided driving or biking "watchable wildlife" tour of the Corridor that includes stops at each facility and links the various habitat types of public lands via scenic roadways. By developing a tour brochure that can be disseminated at each individual facility and through the Delaware Tourism Office and the DNREC Division of Fish and Wildlife, these facilities can reach an audience that is sensitive to Corridor resources and provide a broader level of awareness about the area and the importance of its habitat. The Delaware Tourism office may also be able to provide technical or financial assistance for developing and marketing the brochure and program.

**2. Advance conservation in the Corridor beyond the planning phase, through coordinated regional planning and the creation of a non-governmental coordinator position for the Corridor.**

The Corridor is an important conservation area for many agencies, organizations, and individuals, but the *sole* focus for none of them. Providing a forum for information exchange and continued communication about Corridor issues beyond the planning phase will be crucial for keeping this effort going, and ultimately for the success of preservation efforts in the Corridor. As the facilitator of this planning process, the Nature Conservancy has developed the contacts and local trust needed to effectively coordinate implementation efforts and is currently working with the DNREC Division of Fish and Wildlife to develop the resources necessary to provide ongoing coordination in the form of a non-governmental Corridor coordinator.

The coordinator would play a key role in many of the strategies detailed here, including: promoting implementation of this plan's strategic actions by the collaborating agencies, continuing to improve information and data on Corridor resources as they become available (for example, coastal plain pond data/analysis in Maryland), using Corridor analysis to identify more specific priority areas (like state forest lands most critical to manage for maturity), convening partners to identify priorities and fill any gaps, and developing informational and educational materials for partners to use (like a Corridor "watchable wildlife" tour brochure). The Coordinator would also play a crucial role in coordinating

tracking, monitoring, and reporting on the success of Corridor preservation efforts, as described in the *Monitoring and Measuring Success* section of this document.

The Coordinator will also play a key role in maintaining a presence in the local community. As part of the planning effort, great strides were made to include and communicate with local residents about the importance of Corridor habitat and the effort to plan for its conservation. This achievement will be quickly lost without ongoing communication with the community about the implementation of strategies and the successes of these efforts. Continued outreach to the community as implementation progresses could be one of the Coordinator's responsibilities.

Integrating Corridor strategies and goals in the efforts of the counties and the numerous agencies involved in conservation will also benefit greatly from the services of a Coordinator. While representatives from many different entities were involved in and agree with the strategies recommended by this plan, actually getting those strategies into the formal work plans (and budgets) of those agencies and organizations will, in many cases, require additional outreach. This is particularly true with the counties -- planning staff was involved in strategy-making, but strategies have not been formally presented to commissioners/councilmembers (with November elections there was little opportunity.) The Coordinator could also, by working with the Office of State Planning Coordination, help explore ways to do planning for the Corridor on a more regional level.

**3. Reduce non-point source pollution to streams and wetlands and increase awareness of Corridor values by conducting outreach on Corridor values, how to reduce pollution from residential areas (lawn care, septic system care, management of yard waste), and cost-sharing grant opportunities for homeowner pollution reduction.**

Improperly managed lawns and septic systems are growing contributors to water pollution and the degradation of stream, wetland, and coastal plain pond habitats. Homeowners can take action to reduce non-point source pollution, or to create significant habitat on their lots, but are often not reached by farm service agencies that provide resources and assistance for non-point source pollution management. There are cost-sharing grants available to landowners for non-point source pollution control, but many lot-owners may not know about them. DNREC Coastal Management Programs has a suite of materials and resources to educate people on non-point source pollution, and can offer programs and resources to the landowners with larger residential lots. However, identifying groups of landowners to which to present these materials can be difficult where there are not active civic associations. Identifying groups of homeowners and community groups (Ruritan, Lion's Clubs, churches) to which Coastal Management Program's outreach efforts can be directed is a role that community members and any partners working in the Corridor can help fill. In the meantime, Coastal Management Programs can focus on identifying any new or existing homeowners associations (as they develop) in or near the Corridor to provide outreach on non-point source pollution using their existing tools/capacity.

**4. Increase advocacy for Corridor conservation by developing and implementing an advocacy training program in the Corridor.**

With growth pressures and land values increasing and the Corridor being one of the last remaining rural areas in Delaware (and especially New Castle County), there will be tremendous pressure for development in the area. An impassioned local voice for conservation in the Corridor will be needed to balance this pressure. Being a successful advocate for conservation issues takes skill, practice, and knowledge of the issues that can be learned. The Delaware Nature Society and DNREC Coastal Management Programs have programs and materials for training regular citizens to be effective advocates for the issues that effect conservation, but expanding those programs and materials to specifically address Corridor needs will require additional resources.

Delaware Nature Society can work with DNREC Coastal Management Programs, and others to develop a program (and funding) for advocate training tailored to produce educated advocates for Corridor issues and habitat, building on existing program elements and materials and expertise from the Corridor. The Chester River Keeper could be an active implementer/promoter of this program in the Maryland portion of the Corridor. Incorporating Corridor-specific issues and priorities in this program will make it particularly effective. Ideally, this program would lead to the creation of an advocacy network to communicate and respond to conservation issues that arise.

In the short-term, the Delaware Nature Society can invite Corridor residents to participate in their existing Advocates training program and include them in a network of online activists enlisted to support conservation issues ranging from local to federal in scope. Tailoring a Corridor-specific advocates program will require getting the resources to seek participants from the Corridor and to tailor the program to Corridor-specific issues and needs.

**5. Enhance habitat on private lands by expanding the Delaware Nature Society's "Backyard Habitat" program to yards with forests, riparian areas, and/or coastal plain ponds in Corridor priority areas.**

Simple management changes or restoration efforts can make a big difference for areas where residential lots include or back up to streams, coastal plain ponds, or larger forested areas. A back-yard habitat program is a program that provides information and technical assistance to homeowners on how to improve the habitat in their yards, largely through planting or maintaining plants/trees, to enable their yard to merge with the ecology of its landscape context. Like the non-point source pollution program mentioned above, lot owners are often not reached by the land and restoration programs offered to farmers or large landowners, but are collectively a significant source of habitat degradation.

The Delaware Nature Society has a "Backyard Habitat" program through which landowners are provided with information and advice on the things they can do to create better wildlife habitat on their own properties. Targeting outreach efforts for this program to Corridor priority areas (coastal plain ponds, forests, and riparian buffers) would make this program more available to landowners in the Corridor within the Delaware Nature Society's existing capacity and resources. The Delaware Native Plant Society has produced a useful guide to landscaping with indigenous plants entitled *Delaware Native Plants for Landscaping and Restoration* that is available to landowners and conservation

organizations at a nominal fee.<sup>2</sup> Adding additional outreach and exploring ways (and funding) to focus more specifically on Corridor priority habitats (like coastal plain ponds) or to provide more in-depth assistance would create even better opportunities for Corridor landowners. Some potential funding sources that could be explored include the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary, Audubon, and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

**6. To build public awareness, understanding, community connections and support for Corridor issues and priorities, create a new suite of community programs or events.**

Building community connections and building community support and appreciation for conservation are two Corridor goals that could be met through similar means. With support and participation from the local community, DNREC could help establish an annual or bi-annual event to celebrate the Corridor's rural and natural heritage – similar to Port Penn's *Marsh Weekend*. Developing community support and capacity for institutionalizing this event would be crucial to its ongoing success, and help to insure its relevance to the community. Making it a fun and educational event for families and people of all ages would help insure its success. Tying this event into wetland restoration efforts could provide a hands-on demonstration of restoration that would be both educational and informative. Incorporating a Corridor awards program would also help tie Corridor restoration and management efforts to the event, and provide recognition to good stewards in the Corridor. The state tourism office could be a useful resource for marketing and advertising the event.

Holding a separate or related amphibian road count or "frog watch" is another way for the DNREC Division of Fish and Wildlife to involve the community in Corridor habitat preservation in a fun and educational way. This is a particularly relevant activity for building awareness of amphibian diversity and cultivating interest in protecting the coastal plain ponds that are so prolific in the Corridor. There are several existing opportunities that could be utilized to do this. One opportunity is to build on the existing Division of Fish and Wildlife frog count with a Corridor-specific count. Another way to build from existing programs would be to disseminate information on National Wildlife Federation's Frog Watch USA program<sup>3</sup> to Corridor residents, for a more a more self-directed participation in a national effort to monitor and raise awareness about threats to frog habitat.

Another educational program that could build both community connection and provide education on Corridor habitat is a "Stream Watch" training program. The Delaware Nature Society provides stream watch training that instructs volunteers on how to collect and record vital information on the quality of local streams. There are no known stream watch volunteers monitoring Blackbird Creek or Cypress Branch, but one way to cultivate interest in starting a local Stream Watch (and also to build general knowledge and interest in maintaining stream health) is to hold a Stream Watch training in the Corridor. The Delaware Nature Society has the capacity to provide a Stream Watch training in the Corridor, and the Delaware National Estuarine Research Reserve has a site with good access to Blackbird Creek where this outdoor training could take place. The Delaware Nature Society can work could work with the Delaware National Estuarine Research Reserve to schedule and hold a training get residents involved in monitoring the quality of local streams.

<sup>2</sup> Order forms for the *Delaware Native Plants for Landscaping and Restoration* booklet are available at the Delaware Native Plant Society's web site: [www.delawarenativeplants.org/dnps-natplantsbook.htm](http://www.delawarenativeplants.org/dnps-natplantsbook.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Information on Frog Watch USA is available at <http://www.nwf.org/frogwatchUSA>.

The Adopt-A-Wetland provides a similar opportunity for residents to have hands-on involvement in Corridor habitat improvements. Through this program, the DNREC Division of Fish and Wildlife coordinates and leads groups of interested community organizations, businesses, civic associations, school groups, families, and individuals in wetland stewardship projects. Adopt-A-Wetland projects can include cleanup, protective monitoring, nature study, plant and animal surveys, bird watching, habitat enhancement, water quality monitoring, and fishing, so they provide opportunities for residents to learn more about tidal wetland and coastal plain pond habitats and to participate in protection, restoration, and research. The DNREC Division of Fish and Wildlife could focus some of its Adopt-A-Wetland projects and outreach to the Corridor, and even combine them with frog count outreach and projects in the Corridor for maximum impact and utilization of existing programs. Interested Corridor residents and groups can learn more about the Adopt-A-Wetland program and how to participate by contacting the Division of Fish and Wildlife or by visiting the Adopt-A-Wetland Web site.<sup>4</sup>

**7. To help landowners take advantage of the conservation as a tool for estate and retirement planning, provide Corridor landowners with expert information and assistance.**

Conservation of land can be a very effective tool for estate planning and retirement planning, but not all landowners have access to a financial advisor knowledgeable about conservation as an estate or retirement planning tool. To provide Corridor landowners with this access, The Nature Conservancy can hold an estate planning seminar for farmers and landowners in the Corridor that will provide information and resources on how conservation can be a tool/asset to them.

Because estate and retirement planning are complicated and largely dependent on an individual's specific situation and needs, it is difficult for any individual landowner to come away from a seminar with the ability to implement the practices recommended. So, in order to provide more individualized assistance that would allow landowners to better act on their newly-acquired knowledge, The Nature Conservancy can explore ways to provide individualized follow-up assistance from an expert to seminar participants. There are a number of mechanisms that have been used by others to provide this kind of follow-up without giving direct legal advice or dictating the provider. These include providing of vouchers that can be used with a variety of professionals, and providing competitive grants that landowners can use to pay for professional assistance. The Nature Conservancy will explore these mechanisms to find a proven model that is likely to work well for landowners in the Corridor.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://dnrec.state.de.us/DNREC2000/Divisions/FW/Adopt-A-Wetland>.